

# In the Bloody Veil

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Elena García Conejero

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## 1. *Introduction*

### 1.1. *The Monk: An Unconventional Masterpiece*

Stemming from the literary vogue seeded in Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1765), and germinated through his most reputable acolyte, Anne Radcliffe, and her *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Lewis – writing at the green and effervescent age of 19 – produced a far more bizarre and fanciful Gothic romance that sensationally exploited fear and brutality, and would go on to color succeeding Romantic poetry and fiction, catalyzing the blossoming of horror as one of the most popular genres both in written and visual narratives. Published four years before the nineteenth century, *The Monk* (1796) exhibits an exceptional awareness of its historical contextualization as a work that dramatizes the Anti-Catholic reaction in an emerging Protestant England, as well as the residual intellectual frenzy, and religious skepticism left by the French Revolution. Despite being instantly condemned as profane, gruesome, and obscene due to its (porno)graphic representations of murder, rape, sex, and brutality, Lewis's novella became an instant success, and – as Michael Gamer conjectures – “Lewis most likely would have been prosecuted under the Common Law for either obscene or blasphemous libel had he not published a bowdlerized fourth edition early in 1798” (Gamer, 1048). By explicitly introducing visceral violence and overt sexuality, *The Monk* reinvents the Gothic mode – a genre that seemed not to be uncensored enough for Lewis – and becomes the first novel of a new literary category, the aforementioned (Male) horror Gothic.

A seemingly Protestant, Enlightened exposé on Catholic barbarism, the action is set in the convent of St Clare, in a Madrid still under the rule of the Inquisition, and revolves around the sexual awakening and moral downfall of its eponymous anti-hero, the monk Ambrosio, who is initially admired as a “Man of Holiness” (Lewis, 11). He represents the figure of authority within and outside a patriarchal community that, however, is eventually revealed to be governed by the presence of a threatening femininity that, materialized in the form of a rather sinister matriarchy, reveals his forbidden desires. The raw depictions of sex and violence against almost all female characters might render such a text as unquestionably misogynistic, but the narrative seems to reassure those sexually assertive and physically aggressive women by enabling them to acquire masculine traits, and simultaneously effeminize those male characters – namely, the monk. That is, Lewis's ill-fated female characters are allowed to have agency, individuality, liberty, and sexual freedom, and – shying away from the popular feminine heroines – generates new possibilities within the Gothic representations of women. Throughout the novel, gender confusion and abnormality are tightly associated with body instability, androgyny, and monstrosity; with the “genuine” supernatural, which plays a prominent role in the story.

One of the most celebrated moments is the supernatural episode “The Bleeding Nun of the Castle of Lindenberg,” the ghostly presence of a woman who had exhibited murderous and lascivious attitudes in life. This cautionary tale on erotic sin, which became extremely popular at the time, resembles a seventeenth-century French legend derived from a historical witch trial held in 1634 in the region of Loudun, by which a group of nuns were declared to be possessed by the devil under the enchantments of a Catholic priest. Historical facts are organically (and conveniently) exaggerated by myths, by fiction, and the figure of the Bleeding Nun is hence no exception; yet, despite seemingly being just a macabre warning on surrendering integrity to violent passion, her sadistic past, frightening image, and gory intentions conceal a series of intricacies that not only prefigure everything else in *The Monk* but reveal her as the embodiment of the religious and intellectual confusion at the time, of the intersection between revolution and reaction, transgression and conformism, violence and virtue, and thus of the fatal consequences of remaining within a liminal space where neither religion nor rationality are able to embrace new ways of existence, power relationships, and identities.

## 1.2. The Gothic Nature: Abject, Grotesque, and Uncanny

Any examination of the term “gothic” inescapably evokes three related concepts: the abject, the grotesque, and the uncanny. By its very nature, Lewis’s *The Monk* accommodates elements that belong to each of these notions, but the figure that best embodies the merging of these Gothic particularities is that of the Bleeding Nun. The abject – a term coined by the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* – is mainly concerned with those societal taboos and anxieties regarding the materiality of the body, and the sensation of horror triggered when exposed to bodily excretions (namely, an open wound, blood, sperm, warm milk, vomit, urine, pus, or feces). Kristeva allocates the corpse as the ultimate abjection, as “death infecting life. (...) Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us,” particularly if “seen without God and outside of science” (Kristeva, 4). In other words, the encounter with a corpse urges us to recognize our own ephemerality, and the unescapable putrefaction of our own bodies, blurring the semantic border between subject and object, conscious and unconscious, self and other. The abject is hence the refusal to death’s persistent materiality; a corporeality that shows the outermost edge of our own state as living organisms. Accordingly, the abject derives from a “primal repression” that separates what is human from the animalistic, the latter being the representative of “sex and murder” (Kristeva, 13), and constitutes both the danger posed by the disturbance of meaning (of identity, order), and the traumatic response – the return to such a primitive suppression – against “what does not respect borders” (Kristeva, 4).

For Kristeva, literature “seems to be rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (Kristeva, 207). In Lewis’s novella, the abject undeniably colors the narrative, singularly through (again) the wounded Bleeding Nun, a living cadaver, who – as her vivid designation already implies – profusely bleeds, staining her habit, and thus offering an image of violent death, of the bestial, and the unhuman; contributing to an atmosphere of the abject horror. Such a sanguinary depiction must be understood, however, within a set of cultural assumptions and medical myths associated with the female body, which contributed to those eighteenth and nineteenth-century literary representations of the “mad woman.” In a society afraid of sex – particularly if manifested in women –, many physicians submitted to hegemonic theories of menstrual madness and asexuality, with eminent voices – among them the renowned Dr. William Acton and Dr. William Rowley – avidly writing that “the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” (Acton, 101), and – if sufferers of “passio hysterica” repressed menstruation (or amenorrhea) – their “tongue falters, trembles, and incoherent things are spoken; the voice changes; some roar, scream or shriek immoderately; others sigh deeply, weep or moan plaintively” (Rowley, 54). Accordingly, menstruation became associated with an excessive sentimentality and sexuality, madness, brutality, and irrationality (with “hysteria”), and thus women – “undoubtedly more prone than men to commit any unusual or outrageous acts” (Jacobi, 5) – were endowed with a ghostly, reasonless, deformed, and murderous shape, one that unavoidably reawakens the reiterated figure of the Bleeding Nun.

This characterization is directly linked to the second Gothic term, the grotesque, which also plays a key role in the construction of such a disturbing entity. The grotesque originated in the ancient Roman period, initially referring to ornate, exotic, and decorative flourishes in art and architecture, entailing the bizarre, the hideous, and the irrational. Grotesque figures are usually mythological beings, or rather anomalous, misshaped anthropomorphic monsters that are able to change their size, disrupting the rigidity, the corporeal limitations present in realistic depictions. Similarly, the Bleeding Nun – a cautionary legend, or myth– functionally plays with scale as she undergoes physical transformations, transitioning from a frail young woman towards a large and masculinized monster that terrorizes her male victims. By altering her corporeality – an unfathomable process without the intercession of witchery, of the supernatural, and thus evil –, the spirit is strangely discordant in relation to her environment, gravely disarranging reality’s appearance. Without being comedic or absurd, the Bleeding Nun invokes and heightens the grotesque by eccentrically changing the context that surrounds her as well as her observers, which enables her to violate gender specificity, dangerously contorting power relationships, and thus becoming an unnatural demon to be feared.

The witnessing of these continuous transformations leads to the third literary conception, that of estrangement, known as “the uncanny.” This term (in German, “unheimlich”) has been mostly molded by the psychoanalytic interpretation provided by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 seminal essay “The Uncanny.” He describes such an experience as “that class of the frightening which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar (...) established in the mind and become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud, 241); that is, to experience something that is alien, and yet recognizable (homely), and which involves a process of rejection, a suppression of those desires and natural impulses. This perception is tightly related to Kristeva’s the abject, by which the corpse is both alien (a reminder of human mortality) and peculiarly familiar (a deceased human body), and it is usually employed in Gothic narratives to portray repressed desire in the form of the uncanny body, in the guise of a vindictive shadow that corrupts the domestic sphere, creating a feeling of estrangement, the feeling of the “unhomely.” It is indeed repression what mutates a harmless space into strange vastness, and the Bleeding Nun (among other ghostly apparitions in the story, such as the Devil himself) is an unhindered force that epitomizes the “uncanny.” A widely illustrated, and familiar icon to the novel’s readership – the image of the nun –, her bleeding presence, however, exerts a feeling of terror that originates from the rejection of blood as a sign of sexual desire, the pollution of the untouched female body, as well as women’s reproductive gift. She becomes a kind of “self-ghost” of the society she haunts, the materialization of their repressed passions, of their fears, of what belongs to the unconscious. No wonder, then, the need to represent such a disturbing ghostly evil – what cannot be explained; what does not obey boundaries – in terms of the supernatural, generating a fissure in the natural realm of the rational.

### 1.3. The Supernatural: Rejection of the Divine and the Rational

*The Monk* is a vivid contextualization of a cosmos that is experiencing a transition towards an early (and uncertain) modernized world, where its morals are reassessed within the disconcerting Age of Reason, a time when the holy seems to be manifested in its most primal form, and consequently morality must be reshaped in the form of fear. As Peter Brooks ascertains in his “Terror and Virtue: The Monk,” Lewis’s novel – aware of its Gothic conventionalisms, and introducing “Enlightenment secularism” (Brookes, 249) as its premise – counters any rationalist demand or pretense by reclaiming those unexplainable phenomena that ridicule any sensible mind, pursuing to ascertain the eerie beyond the natural, living world. Yet, despite depicting rational secularization as surrendering its authority and succumbing to the spiritual, re-sacralization – whether in its orthodox or humanistic Christian configuration – is neither functional, and thus only the “tremendum” (Otto, 12) – religious fear or awe – prevails in the religious experience. Therefore, reason and God sense’s disintegration

require a re-examination and re-definition of the moral and divine bodies that dominate such a reshaped world. According to Otto, religious fear derives from a previous “daemonic dread” (Otto, 15), from an uncanny feeling; also defined as a “ghost fear” (Brookes, 252) that originates in the acknowledgment of the existence of a phenomenon beyond humankind, an absolute other that is both sublime and awful. In other words, the reintroduction of the sacred in *The Monk* as a reaction to Enlightenment’s desacralization (and violence) – a reintroduction prompted by the presence of the Bleeding Nun – cannot be understood as an affirmation of the divine, but rather of terror, of superstition, of witchcraft, of those demonic impulses that dwell in an individual’s inner self. As a result, the awful, the supernatural – what cannot be places as sacred or divine – becomes the only guarantee of morality, one in which retributive justice stems from (the fear towards) transgression, the wickedness that strangely remains in the physical world, transforming its natural environment. In contrast with the Romantics – who, in order to revert such a growing absence of conventional faith, tried to elucidate the human complexities through a disclosed, transcendental, and imagination-driven religion – Gothic writers seemed to have a rather more catastrophist attitude, concluding that the individual is not able to surpass and modify the real world. Lewis’s novella clearly exemplifies such attitude by reacting against rationality and reassessing the hallowed through the reiteration of the inexplicable presence in the natural world, a reiteration particularly hyperbolized by the Bleeding Nun – the uncanniest character in the story –, who introduces the supernatural in an inordinately rationalistic and propriety-obsessed society, altering its already withering state apparatuses.

#### 1.4. The Bleeding Nun: A Walking Anxiety

Following these premises, the present dissertation aims at elucidating the Gothic figure of the Bleeding Nun – its main subject of study – as the primary vital force in *The Monk*, one that not only foreshadows the main characters’ fate but also incarnates the collapse of those traditional moral values – which cannot be reconciled neither by a “sanitized” religion (English Protestantism) nor by violent rationality – through her abject, grotesque, and uncanny appearance. To do so, it will first examine the representations of the figure of the nun and convent life in an England deeply permeated by anti-Catholicism, and how Lewis’s novel unexpectedly conceives a matriarchal space where his female characters – whether perceived as virgins, whores, or tragic lovers – can exercise their subversions (their “masculinity”), overthrowing the tyranny they are initially subdued to, and thus feminizing the other male characters. Such apparently anti-Catholic sentiment will be further revisited (and refuted) through the analysis of a key passage in the novel, the burning of the St Clare convent (and the nuns inside), which evidences that, rather than just anti-Catholicism, the author – believed to be homosexual – might be introducing an anti-clerical discourse against the ideological constraints of

religious education, as well as a clear anxiety towards revolutionary violence. In the second section, then, the French Revolution – in conjunction with scientific, anatomical advancements – will be briefly explored as essential discourses in the social (and rational) construction of not only the literary Demon Lover but – most importantly – the violent woman as an unfemale, unsexed, monstrous, and grotesque entity. Greatly influenced by these enlightened notions, *The Monk* employs androgyny and transgending in order to problematize what is rational and what is irrational, to play with gender confusion, to give possibility outside rationality, and such fluidity – already hinted in the first section of the dissertation – will be analyzed through the disturbing character of Matilda, who – despite being generally interpreted as the Gothic villain – reveals the fragility of a gender specificity emphasized by both religious education and enlightened assumptions. Finally, the figure of the Bleeding Nun will be anatomized through her role as a Demon Lover, as a Gothic double whose abject body – derived from the opposition between her fair veil and the image of blood – unveils a will of transformation that can only exist within the supernatural, an intangible state that manifests how neither religion (whether Catholicism or Protestantism) nor violent rationality can allocate her transgressions, remaining a walking anxiety for those who gaze at her.

## 2. *Virgins, Whores, and Lovers*

Un des abus des plus horribles de l'état monastique, mais qui ne tombe que sur ceux qui, ayant eu l'imprudence de se faire moines, ont le malheur de s'en repentir, c'est la licence que les supérieurs des couvents se donnent d'exercer la justice et d'être chez eux lieutenants criminels : ils enferment pour toujours dans des cachots souterrains ceux dont ils sont mécontents ou donc ils se défient. Il y en a eu en France : c'est ce que dans le jargon des moines ils appellent "être [in pace,]" à l'eau d'angoisse et au pain de tribulation.

Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*

At a first glance, the figure of the nun – concealed from the worldly realm – mirrors the inaccessible female virtue as a saintly, virginal, docile entity; the incarnation of the perfect *Angel in the House*. Traditional convent visual rhetoric has compellingly furnished the ubiquitous portrayal of such a “*vestal virgin*” as – to all appearances – an absent creature confined in a *hortus conclusus*, often holding, in reverent contemplation, a wooden *crux immissa* (a token of contrasting semantic nuances, among them earthly existence, death, faith, and forgiveness), and some *passiflora* (signifiers of purity, fertility, and – ultimately – the passion of Christ).

Be that as it may – however immaculate the votary might be delineated –, such a romanticized archetype certainly summons a string of puzzling uncertainties, for how much of that saintliness is



thrust upon her? In other words: is she freed by her calling or subdued by her impoundment? Has she deliberately surrendered motherhood, or does she begrudge the terrene flowers their fecundity? Is she an unpolluted being or a threatened sexual object? Most intriguingly, does she behold Christ's passion or her own?

Yet, just as her veiled body, her thoughts remain obscured, leaving these questions unanswered, transmuting her into a rather complex looking-glass icon difficult to translate, and such obscurity reflects her ambiguous and conflicting nature, configured by a combination of popular clichés that mingle chastity with sexual promiscuity.

## 2.1. Protestant England: Gothic Representations of the Nun and Convent Life

Reinforced by the eighteenth-century's (and earlier) preoccupation with women's virginity and carnal dismissal, the secluded nun's physical unattainability prompted a salacious allure, an almost inevitable erotization of her domestic celibacy by the collective imagination's "voyeurism," the deflowering of her isolation, and – by extension – the arousing incursion into the saintly laws that ruled her monastic (bodily) fortification. R. Howard Bloch, outlining medieval perceptions of women, asserts that there is "no way of speaking about virginity that does not imply its loss, no poetics of praise that is not already complicit in the violence of rape" (Bloch, 112), an observation that accurately encapsulates the sexual forces that govern *The Monk*. Following a long literary tradition of stories (reaching back to Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* (1558)) that detailed the sexual adventures of monks and nuns as ironically and paradoxically straightforward venereal, Lewis's novella also includes such conventions, with an eponymous protagonist who – seduced by the scheming, and voluptuous Gothic villain Matilda – becomes the voracious corruptor, rapist, and murderer of the cloistered Antonia, whose sexual unattainability makes her even more desirable; a titillation that stems from the forbidden violation of the innocent. Like many artists at the time, Matthew Lewis exploited the erotic potentiality for such encounters, a depiction with a particular relevance in the England of the eighteenth-century.

In the so-called Land of the Rose, the conceptualization of the nun was singularly thorny due to the nation's delicate interconnection with Catholicism. Ever since the sixteenth century, when Henry VIII divorced Rome in his constitution of the Anglican Church as its Supreme Head, the political condemnation of Catholicism – upheld by instances such as the dissolution of English monasteries in the 1530s, crushing laws (under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I) such as the Act against Priests of 1585 – by which those who offered aid to Catholic clergymen would face the death penalty –, and reductionist state propaganda that identified Catholics as a threat, particularly after the failed

Gunpowder Plot of 1605 – spread through a social contagion process that concluded in a strong anti-Catholic susceptibility, a sequela that would endure until the late Victorian era, penetrating the collective imagination and popular opinion, and hence permeating the literary production of the time.

The phenomenon of the Gothic novel materialized in the eighteenth-century, a period particularly saturated with the aforementioned anti-Catholic apprehension due to revitalized worry over a Catholic Stuart monarch ascending to the throne. This environment strengthened the acknowledged perception of the Catholic Church as despotic, repressive, and – hence – perfectly unholy; a discourse that shaped English literary representations of convent life. Accordingly, monasteries, convents, and abbeys – patriarchal microcosms, or “smaller states” (de Bonald, 70) with their own authority and potential transgressions that generate a claustrophobic atmosphere – were indistinctly depicted as temples of degenerate, lustful gratification where lascivious “abbots, priors, and monks kept as many (young winsome) women each,” tempting and depraving them, “(whose) crimes renewed the existence of Sodom and Gomorrah” (Norman, 15), leaving little to the imagination.

In this regard, as a demonized muse, Catholic tradition – particularly images of Gothic architecture; cavernous spaces of pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses – was resurrected by the eighteenth-century Gothic revival as its most notable inspiration during an age that – at the same time – witnessed a revolutionary, intellectual metamorphosis induced by a new-reason based order, the Enlightenment. Religion (in this case – again –, Catholicism) consequently acquired the status of an authoritative institution whose barbarous and superstitious mythological resources justified what could not be rationally explained, the supernatural, and Gothic literature solidified this conception by cunningly identifying the Roman Church with divine wrath, tyranny, rotteness, murder, and ghostly murderers, vice, debauchery, and fornication; overall, an inescapable, sinful tragedy. Such a radical reaction can already be discerned in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, whose antagonist’s (the Gothic villain Manfred) lack of self-control leads him to abandon Christian virtues in favor of Gothic passion: a “hedonistic, self-gratifying (...) pleasure” (Clery, 66) so fervent that it obscures his ability to reason; a self-indulgence that incites him to seek an incestuous affair (and marriage) with the daughter-figure Isabella, and plot the dissolution of his legitimate union to Hippolita. Moreover, Manfred’s desired partition is eventually refused by his foil, Friar Jerome, who “interfere(s) in the affairs of my (Manfred’s) domestic” (Walpole, 32), recalling Pope Clement VII’s forbidding of Henry VIII’s matrimony annulment and remarriage, the main germ of the English Reformation.

Therefore, English Gothic novelists were undoubtedly acquainted with such an Anti-Catholic discourse, as well as with Enlightenment erotica (Wagner, 85), which engendered the coetaneous

*parodia sacra*, a popular eighteenth-century masquerade fantasy that narrated the amorous adventures between libertine priests and cardinals in disguise, and (potentially pregnant) nuns, who, otherwise, would have been considered withered beauties (and wasted fertility) if not savored by men. English writers milked these trendy stereotypes for every possible drop of juicy sensational obscenities and abominations, and the convent inescapably became the brothel, the bawdyhouse, which – at the time – was commonly known as the “nunnery,” procuresses baptized as “abbesses,” and prostitutes, as “nuns.”

Catholic devotees, then, were also characterized as libertines, indecorous, motivated by selfish pride rather than genuine piety, and Matthew Lewis made sure to capture their deceitful nature in the very opening of his novel:

**Do not encourage the idea that the Crowd was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information.** But very few were influenced by those reasons; and in a city where superstition reigns with such despotic sway as in Madrid, to seek for true devotion would be a fruitless attempt. The Audience now assembled in the Capuchin Church was collected by various causes, but all of them were foreign to the ostensible motive. **The Women came to show themselves, the Men to see the Women.** (Lewis, 11)

The narrative’s introduction already establishes the sacred margins of the church as a tempting, breeding ground for courtship, and gossip, almost as if intendedly outlined to “affront the sensibilities of the book’s English Protestant readers” (Salter, 57), stressing the voluptuary, and erroneous essence of Spanish Catholicism.

But, analogous to the bordello, another equally influential interpretation of the convent was that of the jailhouse or madhouse, in which the figure of the nun incarnated a pitiful, subjugated victim usually incarcerated in hidden dungeons, or a sorrowful, unfulfilled lover. In this case, under a mist of tragic quietude, the (sometimes literal) immurement of the nun – her live burial – was a common Gothic theme that mirrored her extinguished libido, the unnatural burial of her conceptive nature: an image of death in life. This sentimental depiction of the convent as a location for mourning vanished fecundity and love – “a refuge of disappointed worldliness, the grave of blasted hopes, or the prison of involuntary victims; a withering atmosphere in this which to place warm young hearts, and expect them to expand and flourish” (Lady, 244) – was also a byproduct of the Victorian idealization of womanhood, which encouraged the romantic perception that the paragons of femininity – mainly virginity, dedication, spirituality, and modesty – should not be uncultivated, “the Protestant belief that no woman could possibly prefer the life of a nun to that of a wife and mother” (Casteras, 158).

Some narratives also brim over with punishment, a social control mechanism within monastical communities (and any society), where acts of disobedience perpetrated by agents of resistance – in this case, the figure of the nun as a sinful and immoral creature – dangerously challenge the dominance and credibility of clerical authorities. Posthumously published in 1796, Denis Diderot’s *La Religieuse* (translated to English as *The Nun*) recounts the story of a young woman, Suzanne, who – obliged to remain in a convent by her progenitors, and urged to pronounce her vows – refuses to become a novice, and hence – setting herself apart from the other sisters – has to endure agonizing mistreatment, such as being dressed with a simple shirt, dragged on the floor, and locked away for three days in a “small dark underground” (Diderot, 60), a crypt, almost as if a double of (or doubled by) Agnes – who (also wanting to escape St. Clare’s priory, and elope with her beloved Raymond) ends up being drugged by the Prioress, and buried in an underground vault, a catacomb –, both female characters serving as “fallen angels,” Fallen Women to be contemplated as cautionary tales for the rest of the community.

In Gothic literature, then, the imagery of the convent – at first, an image of self-discipline and moderation – is endowed with an oppressive aura – “a den (...) that harbors row after row of dungeons (...) where unreason is shut away” (Byrd, 268) – as a metaphor that recalls the eighteenth-century understanding of incarceration; that is, the restraint of passions by moral and social institutions, a sense of isolation tightly intertwined with the (literal) burial of (what at the time was considered) “madness.” As previously exemplified, this inhumation is particularly manifest in the catacombs of the convent – symbol of the unconscious –, in which “insanity” is further intensified; in which any transgressive compulsion must be tucked away as to disguise the vices that impregnate such a holy place; in which women who do not conform to societal expectations are stigmatized as “mad,” whose disturbance is proof of their mental fickleness; a threat to social hierarchies.

Naturally, all these exotic notions on convent life – which eventually became the staple setting of the so-called convent atrocity tales, or escaped nun narratives – seem to exclusively reduce the figure of the nun (the sinner, the prisoner, the tragic lover) to her repressed sexuality, simplistically establishing a connection between women and bodily desire; but there is more to it than meets the eye: a further reading of the convent – the brothel, the prison, the asylum – might reveal that such an apparently restrictive place is – paradoxically – a liberating space. That is, the convent as an enclosed ecosystem that resists outward normative roles; a textual space for female characters’ subversive potential, where they can exist (and persist) outside restrictive delimitations of femininity; a gap that contains the absence of satisfactory definitions of female sexuality, or rather the lack of contentment with existing designations. What’s more, this discontent conveniently elucidates why the figure of

the nun is an all-pervasive motif almost bound to be encased in the Gothic novel – which, as stated before, is obsessively concerned with the female sexual urge –, a monastic convention that – as fundamental as any murderous monk – manifests erotic unsettledness through her evocation as either chastely deviant, unnatural, and appalling, or voluptuously depraved, and thus monstrous.

In other words, the contradictory figure of the nun became a popularized literary tradition – particularly in the Gothic novel – that not only magnified womanhood stereotypes as a marker of gender differentiation but also worked as a polysemous subject to the examination of female roles that contributed to the (de)construction of femininity, and – by extension – transgression of those pre-given gender identities: women’s agency is restricted by society, whereas the nun’s life is governed by the oppressive Catholic Church; women are compelled to be chaste, nuns openly swear to be so; women are told to keep to the private sphere, the nun is locked in a cell; most intriguingly, the sexual woman is vilified, the sexual nun participates in the female monstrous.

## 2.2. The Convent in *The Monk*: Unmasking Patriarchy’s Fragility

Certainly, the opaque shadow of religion penetrates *The Monk* as early as its title. As expected, the Church (like any other state apparatus) is organized according to the patriarchal hierarchies of the time, and thus the titled character is introduced as “a model of virtue, and piety, and learning” (Lewis, 216), the authority of the community, the father, whereas the Prioress embodies the role of the mother, and the novices, the children; all women under Father Ambrosio’s paternal rule, whose early unbending respect for monastic life contributes to the identification of the convent of St Clare as a physical and psychological prison for those who inhabit it. Gothic literature, however, explored the private, domestic sphere in terms of disguised familial conflicts and cruelties, and the depicted patriarchal dimensions of the Church usually dissolved under a series of dreadful subversions. At the beginning of Lewis’s novel, women seem to be virtually subject to such a domineering command – namely, Ambrosio, the Inquisitors, or the god-like apothecary –, complying to the role of proper devotees, but it soon becomes evident that their imminent licentiousness and rebelliousness overshadow any phallogocentric evaluation.

The all-pervasive presence of female characters in the story (of certain matriarchal areas) challenges, and eventually subdues the male-controlled narrative. For instance, the convent is first presented under the management of the sadistic Mother St-Agatha, the Prioress, who embodies the feminine auxiliary of Ambrosio as the guardian of the Catholic moral authority. Regarding the ingenuous Antonia, her mother Elvira acts as a substitute father by refusing Lorenzo’s request for her daughter’s hand in marriage, whereas her aunt Leonella is her referent – the one that lectures her on

sensibility and austerity –, and Jacintha and Flora become her protectors after her mother's murder. Most remarkably, the Baroness of Lindenberg – the future Bleeding Nun – is portrayed as a stubborn, pragmatic, and violently passionate, fierce leader whose “word was law in the Castle: Her Husband paid her the most absolute submission, and considered her as a superior Being,” pursuing “with unremitting vengeance those who opposed themselves to her wishes” (Lewis, 96).

These instances of female authority – even if restricted to the private sphere – are a clear testament to both a dominant patriarchy and matrilineality by which women (and their unnatural disobedience as either sinners, prostitutes, tragic lovers, or inmates) seem to direct the narrative, constantly commanding the protagonist's impulses: Matilda precipitates his moral decay, Antonia triggers his sexual awakening, and Agnes, who, by unintendedly summoning the most insurgent and petrifying (female) character, the Bleeding Nun, revolutionizes the natural world, the natural course of events. In other words, without the presence of female characters there would be no story. Those male-controlled areas are hence reduced to secluded timeless zones and transposed into liberating spaces where female characters – whether perceived as wasted virgins, appalling whores, or tragic lovers – can exercise their dissidence, their monstrosity as virilized entities capable of effeminizing those given bodies of authority, and thus posing an undeniable (feminine) threat that originates from the perceived violence inherent in such an inflammatory, grotesque defiance.

### 2.3. Anti-Catholicism or Anti-clericalism?

The main plot, settled in and around the Church of the Capuchins in Madrid, (specifically) in the convent of St. Clare, is marked by religious frenzy and brutality. At the end of the novel, for instance, the presence of the Spanish Inquisition, and its savage persecutions, and tortures of non-Catholics in the sixteenth century – in an attempt to suppress any heresy under the accusation of witchcraft, any infringement of religious institutions – reinforce the aforementioned anti-Catholicism of the era. Indeed, the Prioress's incessant (and, apparently, immune in the eyes of the Catholic Church) cruelty is finally punished by a (non-Catholic) mob that – even though threatened with the dreadful vengeance of the Inquisition – beats her up during an attack to the convent under the command of the nobleman Lorenzo, a “moment of popular phrenzy” in which “even the name (of the Inquisition) has lost its effect” (Lewis, 300). In this sense, at the same period when England was becoming a Protestant country, the presence of the Inquisition in the story plays an essential role in the anti-Catholic agenda of the Gothic mode, introduced as an institution belonging to more barbaric and heathen times, as an unevolved threat for the new Church of England. However, if the non-Catholic mob is interpreted as a representation of Protestantism (and its dissolution of Catholicism), such barbaric scene – which portrays the crowd as moved by a passionate anger, as if seeking a sense of satisfaction or recompense

in the inhuman torture of the Prioress, the archetype of the “bad abbess” – elucidates the author’s anticlerical (rather than anti-Catholic) discourse, as well as revolted reaction against revolutionary cruelty.

Several critics, most notably the Marquis de Sade, have argued that Lewis’s novella was deeply influenced by the turmoil of the French Revolution, and – certainly – the bloodthirsty rioters’ grisly murder of the Prioress of St Clare echoes the political upheaval in France and its anti-clericalism. By portraying the rioting mob as animal-like in its ferocity, Lewis inscribes a clear anxiety towards revolutionary violence, and – despite representing the convent life as corrupt, superstitious, and precariously ruled by sexually repressive religious authorities – its overthrowers are depicted as capable of the same atrocities, or even worse. Similarly, many eighteenth-century observers perceived the mercilessly oppressed masses of France taking over the despotic roles of their erstwhile despots, a reversal of roles paralleled by the angry mass in Lewis’s novel. Therefore, the feudal society presented in the story is hence destabilized through utter brutality, as well as through the aforementioned reversal in gender roles, and such an eradication of gender-specificity derives from women’s ferocity, whose excrescence not only emanates from their sexual determination but also from their physical aggressiveness, the outcome of the political and intellectual turmoil at the time.

### 3. *Revolutionary Demons*

“Marat’s barbarous assassin, like those mixed beings to which one cannot assign a sex, vomited up from Hell to the despair of both sexes, directly belongs to neither”

Marquis de Sade, “Discours Prononce à la fête décernée par la Section des Piques, aux mânes de Marat et de Le Pelletier”

The German literary scene experienced the emergence of the ballad as a novel genre after the publication – in 1774 – of what is considered to be one of the first Gothic ballads, which would not only have a profound effect upon the development of European Romanticism but would also inaugurate a long literary tradition known as the ‘Demon Lover.’ Sometimes translated as ‘Ellenore’ or ‘Leonora,’ Gottfried August Bürger’s spectral romance ‘Lenore’ narrates the visitation of a ghostly knight who – masqueraded as the title character’s lover – carries her away on a macabre nocturnal ride through sinister scenery, ominously illuminated by thunderstroke; an outing that culminates in the revelation of the rider as a skeleton with scythe and hourglass, as Death herself.

The literary figure of the Demon Lover became a popular theme for broadside ballads, and was employed as an instructive tool to warn young women about the dangers of courtship and marriage, against crossing the very distinct societal boundaries of propriety. Traditionally, the Demon Lover

was a male spirit who, summoned by female sexual transgression – namely, elopement or premarital sex –, would appear as either a vindictive beloved or an opulent new suitor, and would lure his victim into running away with him before executing her. Demon-lover tales, then, dramatized the struggle between seduction and obliteration, between misogyny and the victimization of “women who have stepped outside the perimeters of society,” resulting in their condemnation and “their psychological or physical destruction” (Reed, vii).

*The Monk* contains two of Lewis’s popular ballads, ‘Alonzo the Brave’ and ‘The Water-King,’ which follow this stereotyped plot line (in the former, Alonzo returns as a vengeful revenant to punish his unfaithful fiancée, whereas, in the latter, the Water-King seduces his unwitting victim into eloping with him before eventually drowning her). The figure of the “Bleeding Nun” also descends from such a literary tradition, but, in this case, incarnates a late eighteenth-century variation on the theme: the female Demon Lover. This character loomed out of the French Revolution, and derived from the contemporary concern over women who had been de-sexed by revolutionary violence, and whose body had experienced a mutation that stemmed from the advances in human biology.

### 3.1. The Birth of the “Unfemale”

Prior to the Age of Enlightenment, men and women were perceived as two analogous variants of the same sex, the latter endowed with an internalized configuration of male genitalia, and categorized as a lesser biological version of their male counterparts. By the eighteenth-century – an epoch suffused with empiricism and rational thought, and governed by a blooming scientific authority that displaced religious eminence, as well as the credibility of nebulous disciplines, namely alchemy and astrology –, sound scientific thinking initiated a steady progress through advances in biology, chemistry, and physics. As a reaction, two distinctly separate sexes surfaced, and – as new theories surrounding the female body developed – stricter classifications of gender roles redefined the boundaries of women’s sexuality, equating women’s sex to their emerging gender.

Physiological theories abounded that “the uterus naturally disposes women towards domesticity” (Laqueur, 155), and – as Tim Hitchcock observes in his article “Sex and Gender: Redefining Sex in Eighteenth-Century England” – women consequently transitioned “from being perceived as sexually aggressive” (like their male counterparts) towards becoming “sexually passive” (Hitchcock, 155). In other words, rather than possessing an equivalent libido to men’s, women were redefined as separate beings who, by nature, were domestic and chaste. Inevitably, a sexually assertive woman was an aberrant entity that not only deviated from social norms but from the natural order itself, and the



likelihood of such a gash in the *status quo* lead to the preoccupation with the possibility of a third gender; the “unfemale.”

Brutality was at the center of such an abnormal sexual category as women’s violence trespassed against the established boundaries between sex and gender unlike any other act, and thus fierce women were not only improperly feminine but “ceased to be female” (Craciun, 47). Many critical voices of the time overtly reviled “feminine” ferocity; even the Marquis de Sade – whose rabid erotic works might evince that he nurtured different judgements behind closed doors – condemned this “female savagery” particularly during the French Revolution, the worst of its bloody atrocities. Writing about Jean-Paul Marat’s assassin (see epigraph in p. 15), Charlotte Corday, de Sade captures the insubordination to a culturally-constructed female identity – one that abdicates violence and cruelty in favor of benignity and nurture –, and how vicious disobedience transforms the criminal into a bestial, unsexed being. By performing such an atrocious act, Corday challenges women’s presumed moral superiority and benevolence – primarily grounded in the middle-class maternal body, which is feminine, and “naturally” weaker – and thus – always politically subordinated – becomes an unfathomable female patriot.

Feminist writers openly pronounced themselves against women partaking in ferocious acts and blood sports, considered an intolerable damage on female liberation. In *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), Mary Wollstonecraft – who, part of the bourgeois intelligentsia, stayed in Paris from December 1792 to April 1795 intending to witness and document such convulsive times – expounded such a belief by savagely demeaning those women who marched on Versailles as “the lowest refuse of the streets, women who had thrown off the virtues of one sex without having power to assume more than the vices of the other,” condemning them as “a gang of thieves,” “a set of monsters” (Wollstonecraft, 87). In other words, women’s violence not only dispossessed them of femininity but deprived them of any masculinity to replace it, and, unable to become a masculinized version of men, they remained unsexed, and, by extension, unfemale.

Despite the notion of multitudes of armed, maddened Parisian women being nowadays a testament to their potential to disturb the persisting conception of women as nonviolent, at the time, the birth of such an unsettling, and bestialized third categorization signified the destruction of natural, double formulations of sexual and gender identities; the infringement of both the constraints and integrity of womanhood. As the paradigm of insoluble contradictions of women’s agency as both generated within and resistant to inequitable power relationships, the savage woman’s body exhibited this discrepancy as it neither banished its “natural,” fleshly “limitations through its violence” (Craciun, 48), nor left them undamaged, but rather evidenced their social construction and precariousness.

### 3.2. A Gendered Public Sphere

Unsexed and unfemale bodies inhabited a bizarre liminal position between two dichotomic realities, two settled species (male and female), the same way undead bodies persist between the living and the dead; no wonder eighteenth-century writers presented sexual assertive and violent female characters (the so-called sexual Other) in combination with the supernatural, the “Bleeding Nun” being the epitome of such an amalgam. The changeability of perceived “natural” boundaries is indeed a revolutionary exercise, and – as the feminist historian Lynn Hunt asserts in her *Politics, Culture, and Class in French Revolution* – “during the French Revolution, the boundaries between public life and private life were very unstable” (Hunt, 45), making French women struggle to reformulate the women’s sphere, women’s liberties, and the concept of woman itself during this brief period of radical disorder. It was not until the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) – with complementary texts such as the Civic Code and the Napoleonic Code – that women were officially eradicated from public and political life, signaling the legal impossibility for them to become citizens in France.

Accordingly, revolutionary analogies of female figures as romanticized personifications of Liberty, Republic, or Mother Nature do not capture women’s agency in a radical, insurgent society, but rather emphasize its desired absenteeism by reinscribing and confirming “male sex-right” (Craciun, 49). The French Revolution erupted amidst a prolonged endeavor to withstand women’s advancement in society, a time when political differences did not merely transpire between men and women, but between each gender group according to class. During the *ancien régime*, French women’s public attendance and influence in societal events remained an enticing chance for those elite femmes, whereas the bourgeois public sphere condemned everything related to opulent garments, whimsical façade, curlicued words, and amusing wittiness.

This dissymmetry that characterized the gendering of public life according to different social strata continued, and consequently the new “republic was constructed against women, not just without them” (Landes, 171) as social status often predominated over gender for the female population. Under the new doctrine of universal rights, women could only be included if withdrawn by the male universal, or could “claim lesser rights and greater moral authority under the sign of difference and exclusion from the universal” (Craciun, 49). This struggle in the advancement of women’s rights connected British women of the Romantic period with their French counterparts – with the gendering of the public sphere under the popular claim that women lack the physical and mental strength to engage in public politics –, and the unsteady divisions generated during the French Revolution provide the perfect context in which to trace those portrayals of women who breath

between the public and the private, the masculine and the feminine. Despite being outwardly depicted as a menacing process within an already-unscrupulous society, transsexuality became a crucial performative exercise that allowed female characters to assume male entitlements, freeing them from suffocating religious and social curtailments imposed by those eighteenth-century belief-systems, and Matthew Lewis exploited androgyny and transgendering as means to magnify and play with such a gender confusion.

### 3.3. Matilda, the Bewildering Gender Bender

The feudal society portrayed in *The Monk* is hence sabotaged by a gender volte-face, by a hybridity particularly exercised by Matilda – the protagonist’s chief tempter –, an innovating character who – though scary or uncanny for the first readership of Lewis’s work – represents a model of emancipation from bourgeois gender expectations through her unsettling ability to take on both masculine and feminine identities in her relationship with Ambrosio. In the very first chapter of the novel, gender confusion is already unveiled when Don Christoval – a young noble of Madrid – informs the naïve Antonia and her aunt about the general belief that Ambrosio is “so strict an observer of Chastity, that He knows not in what consists the difference of Man and Woman” (Lewis, 17), an observation that links the Capuchin’s ingenuity to that of a virtuous woman. Ambrosio’s convent education leaves him unprepared for his sudden sexual awakening, and his difficulties to discern sexual differences are further exacerbated by the transgendering of Matilda, whose frequent shifts from aggressive to passive keep him unconscious, emotionally, and sexually disoriented throughout his liaison with such a cunningly fluid character.

Brought up by a learned uncle – a “man of uncommon knowledge” (Lewis, 229); an alchemist – and given a “masculine” education – part of which included necromancy – that allowed her to “acquire more strength and justness, than generally falls to the lot of my (Matilda’s) sex” (Lewis, 60), her ambiguity is already tangible from her first apparition in the novel as the protégé Rosario, a promising novice monk. Rosario is referred to with feminine traits that could fit the definition of the Gothic heroine, a young religious who – with a “disposition to melancholy” (Lewis, 48) – “answered their civilities with sweetness, but reserve” (Lewis, 40), to the point that “no voice sounded so sweet to him (Ambrosio) as did Rosario’s” (Lewis, 41). Yet, despite this initial affectionate image, Matilda (once gained Ambrosio’s paternal sympathy in their child-father relationship) is disclosed as a woman who appears much more powerful than her former identity may have suggested, much more frightening – especially when she reveals to Ambrosio her “magic arts” (Lewis, 193); witchcraft used to “raise Daemons” (Lewis, 186) –, and dominant, openly challenging Ambrosio’s authority, for whose “own sake I (Matilda) must not obey not” (Lewis, 228).

As a result, equal to him, Matilda changes to a much more masculine status, characterized as a rather (male) Gothic villain within a more than filial and spiritual affection. In fact, the alteration in their familiarity is already anticipated the moment Ambrosio embraces Rosario as his “child,” his role as a preceptor being compromised as he is attracted by the youngster’s features: though loving Rosario “with the affection of a Father. He could not help sometimes indulging a desire secretly to see the face of his Pupils” (Lewis, 43). During a conversation in the garden of the convent, he indeed confesses to Rosario that “From the moment in which I first beheld you, I perceived sensations in my bosom, till then unknown to me” (Lewis, 57); new “sensations” of desire, which – despite being dramatically ironic, and shying away from homoerotic expectations – become sexually unspecified as the relationship father/son mirrors that of father/daughter, and, later, evolves towards a victim/aggressor interrelation.

There are several instances in the novel that manifest Matilda’s continuous transformations, and the significant effects such a liquidity has on her manipulative relationship with the monk. One of the most disquieting scenes occurs when Matilda – still disguised as Rosario – threatens to commit suicide by piercing her bosom, partly cutting her clothes to half-show her left breast, although still not unveiling her face. Instantly sexualized by Ambrosio’s captivated reaction – and reminiscent of Biblical temptation –, she is given permission to stay in the convent, but the monk’s corporeal perception of her becomes clouded, since he has not yet witnessed her countenance. This scene marks the beginning of Ambrosio’s gender confusion, particularly obvious when he eventually expels her from the convent, uttering “Be calm, my Friend! My Rosario! Still let me call you by that name so dear to me! . . . I feel myself incapable of treating you with indifference” (Lewis, 69).

Moreover, Matilda’s gender identity is intricated due to not only her androgyny but also her ability to subvert chivalric conduct in her hunt for Ambrosio’s attentions, being the aggressive, and protective force, making Ambrosio blush in more than one occasion. In this sense, she is unfeminine – or rather more masculine than Ambrosio –, and hence she endangers the monk’s own sexual identity, a man who has ended up being effeminized by a convent education that has made him inadequate to subscribe to any definition of manliness. Matilda’s gender crossing is threatening as it undermines Ambrosio’s status in a community that prioritizes the abbot’s entitlements over a mere novice (a father over a child, a man over a woman). In other words, transgendering (or androgyny) implicates the surrender of power (of authority) from a dominant collective to a marginalized, lesser one.

Consequently, although sometimes interpreted as the “*anima* figure” (Adriano, 167) of Ambrosio (a fantasy in the protagonist’s mind), Matilda constantly scintillates between sexes, collapsing the

boundaries of man and woman, of object and subject, of other and self, and thus being uncannily androgynous as she goes from the novice monk, to the projection of Ambrosio's obsession – an icon of the Madonna in his cell –, to a “real woman,” to a sorceress, and eventually to an incubus (or a succubus, if considered a woman), showing her inconstancy to conform to a limited gender role. A fluid entity, Matilda, then, challenges women's role(s) in the eighteenth-century society, and the ambivalence between the bipolarity of her identities, as well as the resulting distress caused by the discovery that Rosario is indeed a woman, is further reinforced by the discovery that an autonomous, rational, and commanding woman is, in reality, a demon, a witch; ultimately, the so-called femme fatal. By extension, located beyond the natural order of things – identified with the supernatural –, and within the duality between the Madonna and the whore – a binary opposition fundamental in the Gothic reading of the female body –, she represents the antithesis to feminine bourgeoisie ideology, to the new domestic model of womanhood. Her extreme libidinous emotions, desire for power, and lethal beauty reduces the alertness of her male target, making her an archetype that embodies the fear of a growing female influence within the public realm.

At the end of the novel, the intrusive presence of the Devil himself further underlines such a gender volatility. Despite being an unreliable source, Satan admits that Ambrosio's obsession over an icon of the Madonna inspired him to impel “a subordinate but crafty spirit (Matilda) [to] assume a similar form” (Lewis, 440). This “subordinate spirit” could have been male, female, or neither; an unspecified being transformed into whatever gender or form would suit the prince-of-darkness's ambitions. Open to interpretation, then, whether to believe Matilda's account of her early life or the Devil's narration (or none) – whether she is an independent being that converses and employs forbidden knowledge to satisfy her desires and her prey's, or rather the tool of her diabolical master –, she clearly refuses to be limited to a fixed gender identity in either her physical appearance or behavior, seemingly taking gender as performative. That is, she resists masculinist categorizations – those established gendered distinctions – through her sexual fluidity, which not only endangers her victim's sanity, but the rigid social structures she lives in. Furthermore, through her performativity, Matilda evidences the monk as the victim of his own repressive, clerical education, imploring him to release himself from those “vulgar errors” (Lewis, 268), from any apprehension that might preclude his desires.

#### 3.4. Transgendering, a Liberating Exercise

As William D. Brewer argues in his “Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*,” Lewis's portrayal of Matilda may have been inspired by two famous cases of transgendering that developed during the eighteenth-century. Hannah Snell, a working-class Englishwoman, disguised herself as a

man and joined the navy right after her baby daughter died, in an attempt to find her husband, who had abandoned her during her pregnancy. Taking the name of his brother-in-law, James Gray, she participated in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), an accomplishment for which she was highly admired. Another widely known case of transgenering was that of Chevalière d'Eon, a French spy, Dragoon captain, and diplomat, who was acknowledged as a woman by Louis XVI in 1775, and London's highest court in 1777 during a highly publicized trial. Although physicians determined d'Eon's corpse in 1810 as anatomically male, for much of his life, he was celebrated and denounced 'as an Amazon, a thoroughly masculinized woman' (Kates, 256). By persuasively behaving as men, Snell and d'Eon became proof of gender malleability.

In *The Monk*, transgenering might be revealed as a menacing process, but there are some instances – such as Matilda's transformation – that contribute to the idea that such gender fluidity is – in fact – liberating for those female characters as it enables them to acquire certain male privileges, and hence unchain themselves from the constraining religious and cultural belief-systems. Despite Lewis's manifesting a sexist viewpoint on gender roles – writing to his mother in 1803 that “a Woman has no business to be a public character, and (...) in the proportion that She acquires notoriety, She loses delicacy: I always consider a female Author as a sort of half-Man” (in Hoeveler, 1)–, and even sometimes being regarded as having a “murderous misogynous ideology (...) which informs the sexual transformations in *The Monk*” (Blakemore, 527), the author might not be as chauvinistic as is claimed to be. That is, the narrative seems to exhibit both Lewis's sexist clichés as well as women's inferred resistance and subversion of cultural expectations, a dichotomy particularly incarnated by the transgender Matilda, who is both depicted as grotesque, but whose dissenting, and independent mindset is indulged, or at least given a space to develop in the story.

*The Monk* contains several instances of gender confusion and transgenering: the Devil's transformation from an androgynously beautiful youth to a gigantic, masculine figure who appears “in all that ugliness (...) since his fall from heaven” (Lewis, 435); Agnes, who – abandoned to starve in the dungeons of St Clare –, struggles heroically to live, whereas her cavalier brother, Lorenzo, horrified at seeing “a Creature so wretched, so emaciated, so pale, that He doubted to think her a Woman,” (Lewis, 369) faints with horror; or the Prioress, whose ruthlessness and rigid legalism makes her “the most misogynistic character in the novel” (Brewer, 195). As a result, intentionally or not, Lewis revolutionized the Gothic mode by generating powerful, gender defying female characters that ignore societal constraints and achieve their desires through traditionally masculine behaviors, leaving behind ideals of feminine accomplishments and exposing the unreliability of a gender specificity generated in both religious and enlightened ideals. The Matilda-Ambrosio story

foregrounds the first revealing case of transgending in the novel, a case that exposes enlightened (and violent) reason as incapable of receiving different, and othered experiences (namely, women who defy the bourgeois conception of female propriety), yet such a narrative derives from a much darker, uncanny, and destructive character: the Bleeding Nun, the quintessence of the violent unfemale-unsexed.

#### 4. *Veiled and Unhealed*

'You are the first, who ever mentioned the name to me. Pray, who may the Lady be?'

"That is more than I can pretend to tell you. All my knowledge of her History comes from an old tradition in this family, which has been handed down from Father to Son, and is firmly credited throughout the Baron's domains. Nay, the Baron believes it himself; and as for my Aunt who has a natural turn for the marvellous, She would sooner doubt the veracity of the Bible, than of the Bleeding Nun. Shall I tell you this History?'

Lewis, Matthew Gregory. *The Monk*

In a highly critical review of *The Monk*, Samuel T. Coleridge rightly asserted that “the shameless harlotry of Matilda” – the calculating temptress of the eponymous monk Ambrosio –, and “the trembling innocence of Antonia” – the uncorrupted sufferer of Ambrosio’s desire – “are seized with equal avidity, as vehicles of the most voluptuous images” (Coleridge, 374). From the very start of the novel, Matilda and Antonia’s sensuous bodies are indeed captured as objects of male desire: in the first chapter, Lorenzo’s devout eye on Antonia induces the omniscient narrator to enumerate her bodily appeal in a description of her “symmetry and beauty,” which “might have vied with the Medicean Venus” (Lewis, 12); in the second chapter, Matilda is already introduced baring the “beauteous Orb” of a breast to the “insatiable avidity” of Ambrosio’s eye (Lewis, 65), a canonical scene of temptation very much resonant with that of Eve and Adam. Female corporeality is hence constituted through luscious and decadent images that captivate the readers’ imagination, tempting them to sexual pleasure while drawing a censorious line between unrepentant strumpets and virtuous virgins; and yet such an apparently firm taxonomy is deeply transfixed by the most dreadful shade in Lewis’s supernatural tale of horror: the Bleeding Nun.

Making an interesting digression from his general condemnation of the novel’s immorality, Coleridge enthusiastically states that “the tale of the Bleeding Nun is truly terrific” (Coleridge, 376), but never elucidates the reasons why he contemplates such a narrative so favorably. However, it would be safe to believe that most readers of Lewis’s novella could arrive at the same conclusion, intuitively grasping its magnitude: bridging insubordinate female sexuality with deformity and death, the figure of the Bleeding Nun performs outside the expected passive female roles by ardently seeking sexual satisfaction, setting an example for the other female characters’ abhorrent practices. A demonic

evil, her connection to convent life as a nun, and her never-ending ferocity integrate the novel's condemnation of clericalism, and revolutionary violence. In this sense, though barely generating a positive perspective on female desire, her unquestioned continuance as a grotesque silhouette cements the (repellent but) vigorous existence of women that exceed the definition of static objects of male appetite. Regardless of critical discussions tending to focus on the examination of the eponymous protagonist, and the main feminine characters (namely, the antagonists Matilda and Antonia), it is thereby essential to recognize such a literary figure as the (sexual) Other, as an exotic, permutating trope that not only underlies everything else in the main story (its polycentric characters, their nuances, and motivations) but also incarnates sexual dissidence, and moral uncertainty, becoming a reflection of the anxieties and confusion that pervaded an age characterized by an obsolete religious faith and intransigent rationality, both inadequate to assume carnal transgression.

#### 4.1. "The Bleeding Nun of the Castle of Lindenberg," a Bestseller

The figure of the Bleeding Nun is first introduced by Agnes during a discussion with Raymond, inserted as a shift in their subplot clearly differentiated from all that precedes and follows the novel as it is the first overt portrayal of the supernatural in *The Monk*, which serves to establish the distinctly Gothic mood of the novel and situate readers in relation to Gothic literature patterns. Lewis's novella produced – by far – most of the creative content that comprised future anti-Catholic chapbooks concerned with the figure of the Catholic monk and his wicked activities, and such was its success that there were at least two separate tales (namely, the Bleeding Nun, and the Wandering Jew) within it, each of which the subject matter of entire chapbooks – also known as gothic blue books. Derived from Germanic sources and adapted by the author to expand the somber love substory of Raymond and Agnes, the tale of "The Bleeding Nun of the Castle of Lindenberg" is not only the first but the most popular of these supernatural episodes, quickly making omnipresent occurrences in different dramatic adaptations (such as Charles Gounod's five-act opera *La Nonne Sanglante* (1854)), pantomimes, operettas, and children's paper rolls. This sub-narrative is introduced amid the novel's crucial turning point – when Ambrosio, who has finally succumbed to Matilda's seductions, spends the night in her embrace –, a seemingly anticlimactic intercalation of nearly one hundred pages that – though generating certain irritation in the reader as it initially appears excursive to the main plot – eventually becomes an indispensable parenthesis as it utterly transforms the universe in which all the characters will move; the Bleeding Nun being a morally, psychologically, and sexually complex icon almost every major role relates to.



#### 4.2. The Bleeding Nun as a Grotesque Gender Player

As the quintessence of the so-called escaped nun narratives, the Bleeding Nun is the ghost of Beatrice de las Cisternas, a novice who – a century preceding the events depicted in *The Monk* – breaks her vows by eloping from her convent with the Baron of Lindenberg, becoming his concubine. She has, however, “a character so depraved” (Lewis, 147) that she soon desires another lover, and, infatuated with the Baron’s hungry-for-power brother, Otto, conspires to kill the former in order to gain the latter’s affections. She stabs the Baron to death only to be murdered in turn by Otto, who – trying to hide evidence of conspiracy – resolves “to free himself from a Woman, whose violent and atrocious character ma(ke)s him tremble with reason for his own safety” (Lewis, 175). Left unburied in a cave, Beatrice is doomed to periodically hunt the earth until her bones are properly interred, haunting the Lindenberg castle every five years, on May 5<sup>th</sup>, a date that resonates with the uncanny magic of the pentagram.

Displaying lustful and murderous tendencies in life, her deathlike outer image consequently serves as a warning against the perils of erotic desire, of surrendering to passion:

[While] others with gaping mouths and eyes wide-stretched pointed to a Figure, supposed to have created this disturbance. It represented a **Female of more than human stature**, clothed in the habit of some religious order. **Her face was veiled**; on her arm **hung** a chaplet of beads; **Her dress was in several places stained with the blood which trickled from a wound upon her bosom**. In one hand She held a Lamp, in the other a large Knife, and She seemed advancing towards the iron gates of the Hall. (Lewis, 122-123)

Her veiled appearance paradoxically manifests both her former belonging to a religious order, as well as the violence inflicted and received, with the use of the attribute “hung” to qualify her characteristic accessories (the rosary, the knife, and the blood dripping from the wound on her bust), establishing a clear polarization between the presumed purity of a religious woman and her mercilessness. She is hence colored as monstrously devoted to her unrestrained passions, quickly exhibiting – in her younger days – sensual tendencies:

All Bavaria was scandalized by **her impudent and abandoned conduct**. Her feasts vied in luxury with Cleopatra’s, and Lindenberg became the Theatre of the most unbridled debauchery. Not satisfied with **displaying the incontinence of a Prostitute**, She professed herself **an Atheist**. (Lewis, 173)

Beatrice is hence immoderate in every way – she rebels against her vows and the cultural assumptions of women as virtuous, passionless, and passive –, and her destiny seems to originate from her sexual overindulgence and her “violent and atrocious character” (Lewis, 175). Certainly, brutality is at the center of the Bleeding Nun’s narrative. Her lustful and murderous tendencies in life reshape her into a repulsive (female) Demon Lover in the afterlife who rejoices at drowning her victims, and – as such – she disrupts the sex-gender binary by performing both male and female roles through her fluid unfemale/unsexed shape. This gender liquidness is particularly explicit in the inset tale of “Don Raymond’s adventure with the Bleeding Nun” – also known as “The History of Raymond and Agnes,” the blueprint for the Matilda/Rosario-Ambrosio story –, which, introduced in chapter four, unfolds with the virtuous heroine Agnes, who – imprisoned in a convent – agrees to elope with Raymond on the day the Bleeding Nun traditionally appears by disguising herself as the legendary ghost under the belief that nobody will dare oppose her escape if confronted with such an inspiring terror. Nonetheless, although initially deeming such a folkloric tale as “burlesque” (Lewis, 137), the Bleeding Nun herself resurfaces in a moment of unexplained supernatural, and thus the myth (the presaging past) invades the current reality of Lewis’s characters, dissolving any rational skepticism, and any assumption on the inexplicable as miraculous or divine.

Don Raymond, eager to play the role of the heroic cavalier in rescue of a maiden in distress, does not realize – however – that the figure that appears at the appointed hour is the “real” Bleeding Nun. Therefore, in his first encounter with the “false Agnes” (Lewis, 164), Raymond – presuming her at-first-sight corporeal appearance to be his beloved, “enveloped in a long white veil” – embraces “her to my (Raymond’s) bosom” (Lewis, 110), but things are not as they seem. After their accidented nocturnal coach ride, the “false Agnes” is nowhere to be found when Raymond recovers his senses. However, throughout the succeeding nights, the vengeful spirit visits the ill-fated nobleman, who quickly realizes her enlarged figure, her “icy fingers” and “cold lips,” uttering in a “low sepulchral voice” (Lewis, 114) that – far from belonging to a sentient being – reveals the forbidding specter’s distressing nature. The nobleman is horrorstruck by Beatrice’s grotesque physical appearance, and such a vehement reaction manifests the active power she exercises as a figure of female transgression; a power that begins even before her victim realizes her misdeed.

Simultaneously frail and diaphanous enough for Raymond to raise her in his arms, and – later – acquiring a threateningly big presence as “a form of more than a mortal size” with “eyes (...) of the Rattlesnake’s” (Lewis, 114) that suspend the ill-fated nobleman’s faculties – “I (Raymond) remained in the same attitude inanimate as a Statue (...) My eyes were fascinated, and I had not the power of withdrawing them from the Spectre (Lewis, 113) –, the Bleeding Nun’s transformation becomes a

metaphorical representation of the mutability inherent in the unnatural body – here, as the supernatural body –, of its ability to transgress those masculine-feminine boundaries by appropriating the behavior of a male Demon Lover with her (in this case) male victim. Such is her mighty force that she temporarily makes Raymond more dead than she is; impotent, motionless, hanging “lifeless upon the Coverture” (Lewis, 161), and thus transformed into a passive, fearful invalid who can neither speak, nor move.

Despite her intangibility, Raymond’s living body swoons at her undead touch, paralleling the fainting fit of the sentimental heroine in the eighteenth-century novel – his nerves “bound up in impotence,” his veins “been frozen” (Lewis, 113) –, and his fictional death – depicted in the legendary poem – mirrors the demise of the female sufferer in the traditional Demon Lover ballads; in this case, he “sank into the roaring flood, / And never rose again!” (Lewis, *Tales of Wonder* 332) Moreover, Raymond also resembles the popular figure of the female victim by being bound to his demonic tormentor through a supernatural marriage settlement. In his excitement of clandestinely meeting his – seemingly – disguised inamorata, the Marquis de las Cisternas pledges himself to her:

Agnes! Agnes! **Thou art mine!**  
Agnes! Agnes! **I am thine!**  
In my veins while blood shall roll,  
Thou art mine! I am thine!  
Thine my body! Thine my soul! (Lewis, 113)

In response, the ghostly feminine figure asserts that “his own lips have made over to me (her) his body and his soul: never will I (the Bleeding Nun) give back his promise” (Lewis, 122), and ends such extramundane marital vows with “Mine thy body! Mine thy soul!” (Lewis, 114) She appropriates and imitates Raymond’s triumphant song of masculine possession, implicitly mocking and frustrating his chivalric pretensions, and thus possessing him as a passive love-object. She hence embodies the male role within such a union, and thus reverses the traditional betrothal through her masculinized dominant power, finally completing the reversal of gender roles.

Accordingly, the Bleeding Nun’s physical fluidity and trespass against gender constructions derive from her transgressions in life (namely, sexual desire and physical violence), and such violations reshape her into an unfemale mistake, a threat to the patriarchal *status quo*, doomed to everlastingly wander around the castle’s vicinity as an unnatural and monstrous phenomenon. By radically modifying her corporeality, the specter becomes irreconcilable with her surroundings (she becomes grotesque as a subject in process), and threateningly disturbs reality’s image, a process that allows her to disrupt and expose the fragility of gender specificity. She undoubtedly encapsulates

disobedience, wildness, agency, individuality, and malleability; overall, dangerous, unnatural instability that can only be interpreted as unfemale deformity. It is noteworthy, however, how the Bleeding Nun is still summoned by the danger of female sexual defiance – Agnes’s potential elopement with Raymond, for instance – rather than by the misdeeds of her male victims (no mention about any possible penalization for Otto, neither by mystic nor mortal justice). In any case, the Bleeding Nun – an ancient figure that (giving a sense of dramatic irony) foreshadows future (female) dissidence in the story – disdains sexual mores, and, by acting from within the repressive confines of religious institutions through acts of extreme violence, repudiates the physical and moral asceticism imposed by such communities.

#### 4.3. The Bleeding Nun as a Gothic Double: Agnes, Matilda, and Antonia

In claiming Raymond’s vows, as well as in her nighttime visits to the unfortunate’s bed, the Bleeding Nun seems to replicate her former elopement, providing an icy echo of the sexual desires she pursued in life. Transfixing Raymond with terror, his reaction appears to be a milder version of that of Otto – whose “alarm” at the ghost visitations “became so insupportable, that his heart burst,” “deprived of warmth or animation” (Lewis, 175) –, repeating a similar enervating effect. Following this premise, throughout the novel, thematic doubling – a distinctive literary feature of the Romantic period – is unquestionably all-pervasive, particularly through the parallels drawn between the figure of the Bleeding Nun and other female characters; most significantly, Agnes. The stories of both characters center on their sexual misbehavior and its horrific circumstances: Beatrice de las Cisternas had eloped from her convent to indulge her sexual needs – resulting in her murdering, being murdered, and actively unburied – while Agnes – yet innocent and yet not a nun – plans to follow her passions in attempting to escape “the horrors of a Convent” (Lewis, 148), to which her jealous aunt wishes to consign her, eventually being buried alive in an underground vault; living but entombed. There is a certain logic, then, behind the substitution of the Bleeding Nun for Agnes as well as behind Agnes impersonating the Bleeding Nun – and later becoming herself a dying, grotesque nun – given that their similar decisions prompt the converging of their experiences. Beatrice foreshadows Agnes’s ill fate, and – by extension – Agnes is a version of her, yet a seemingly less culpable one due to that – contrarily to the baroness – her desires are “light and venial” (Lewis, 335) because they are aimed towards an appropriate marriage, whereas the Bleeding Nun’s “helpless compulsiveness” makes her “an exemplar of bad desire” (Jones, 142). In a way, Agnes mimics (or rather reproduces) past “bad desire” – the difference between both characters’ forbidden sexual pleasure being one of intensity rather than kind –, and perhaps that is the reason why she is symbolically freed through the death of her born child, redeemed from her terrible sufferings, and enabled to marry Don Raymond at the end

of the novel, a liberation that might signify the ceasing of the nightmare induced by the false and unnatural ideals of chastity. One way or another, both female figures – undead and half-dead – coalesce as images that associate sexual disobedience with the paralyzing horror of the men who gaze at them, a linkage also mirrored by the transvestite Matilda. Despite some scholars declaring that “Ambrosio is a worthy successor to Beatrice in depravity” (Mellerski, 37), Matilda parallels Beatrice’s performance more intimately: both characters are labeled as prostitutes who – reacting within the moral constraints of the convent – abandon abstinence in favor of their passionate impulses; both are capable of extreme, violent atrocities – Beatrice murders the Baron of Lindenberg, while Matilda tries to kill Antonia with her “poignard” (Lewis, 390); and both refuse to conform to ladylike behavior, unrepentant of their transgressions. Most importantly, both are demonized by masculine entities in the novel – the Devil’s in Matilda’s case, and the Wandering Jew in Beatrice’s – who catalyze the negative interpretations of their motivations and actions, and both have the uncanny capacity to assume masculine and feminine attributes, as well as to effeminize those men who have been molded by the androcentric and phallogocentric ideals of monasticism and chivalry, namely Ambrosio and Raymond. Opposite to such subversions, another key female character that might initially not come across as a double is Antonia, the antithesis of Beatrice. Throughout the narrative, the Gothic heroine remains static within the discourse of modesty, and desire seems to only implicitly emerge in the lexicon that describes her reactions (rather than actions). Nonetheless, both the adversative images of Beatrice and Antonia become replaceable tropes as “the iconography of the bleeding nun’s fate is literally visited upon Antonia, while Antonia herself is figuratively a ‘bleeding nun,’” a “violated innocent” (Miles, 158). In other words, textuality ceases their irreconcilable differences, the two antipodes of sobriety generating a sole but doubled image of the veil, and such a symbolic garment – in conjunction with blood, with the abject – is indeed the tell-tale of the inherent monstrosity that characterizes such women.

#### 4.4. The Bleeding Abject Body

The erotic quality of veils is already foregrounded at the beginning of the novel, with Antonia’s countrified prudishness at the church of the Capuchins in Madrid, so when Rosario expresses his inclination to “unveil” his heart to Ambrosio. Analogous to the traditional chastity attributed to women, the veil’s symbolism is perpetually challenged by the impregnating presence of blood in the story, not only evidencing unwelcomed menstrual flow but the defiling of the virgin, leading to the potential consummation of motherhood. Throughout the novel, there is clear emphasis on the conception of the erotic woman, and no female character seems to be exempt from such a heightened sexed representation: in the poem, Baroness Lindenberg fixates her contemplations on Don Raymond,

who finds her obsessive attentions degrading, and who – aided by a baroness named Marguerite when in danger from brigands – describes his savior’s attitude as “licentious and warm” (Lewis, 90); the confinement of Agnes within the convent is referred in the novel as “a fate so contrary to her inclinations” (Lewis, 95); Ambrosio’s delectable sex initiation is catalyzed by Matilda; even the winsome Virginia de Villa Franca is urged to surrender her veil as Lorenzo’s “person pleased her” (Lewis, 273). Comparatively, the only female character whose quiet disposition and decorum are particularly accentuated is the innocent Antonia; nonetheless, the author also pinpoints the fervor hidden behind her poise. In the very onset of the story, the veiled Antonia – a participant in the assembled audience that encircle the Church of the Capuchins at the start of the Sunday service who “appeared to be scarcely fifteen (...) to be possessed of liveliness which excess of timidity at present repressed” – pronounces “I never unveil in public, Segnor” (Lewis, 7), appalled at Don Lorenzo’s attempt to remove her covering. Her age is pertinently selected as she is on the threshold of becoming aware of her sexual body, a dawning realization of erotic emotions that already betrays her veiled naivety, frustrated by her constant reddened cheeks - “suffused with blushes,” “with Crimson” (Lewis, 8), with blood.

As her graphic appellation suggests, the avenging figure of the Bleeding Nun originates from the conflict of her remaining both veiled and bloodstained, both virginal and unhealed, and such a semantic tension conveys the focal threat that governs *The Monk*; that of the monstrous feminine. As previously described, wounded on her breast, the gash hemorrhages profusely, forever washing her garments with iron pigment, and this ichor reference –a reminder of women’s menstrual cycle, and thus their proclivity towards “hysteria” – bespeaks the violence associated with women’s forbidden sexuality, and the impossibility of reaching her vows as a nun, of conforming to any absolute chastity. The location of her wound (her breast, reminiscent of Christ’s wound on his side, although not to be confounded with any pretense of depicting the spirit as a martyr) is far from coincidental, but rather a preferential narrative choice that incorporates an emblematic symbol of corporeal femininity, the double dimension of the female body as the nourishing breast of the mother is simultaneously an object of male desire.

Her open wound, then, offers an image of the bestial, the unhuman; of the abject body. The Bleeding nun is indeed the ultimate abjection, the uncanniest and threatening living corpse that cannot be translated neither by God sense nor by reason (or science). She is not only a persistent reminder of death, but a metamorphosed entity that grotesquely blurs the difference between the human and the bestial, between self (the male; the subject that is knowable and human) and the object (the Other; not fully human or comprehensible), obscuring the semantic border between conscious – women’s

forbidden sexuality – and unconscious – women’s desires, erotic potential, and reproductive apparatus –, and thus endangering the very meaning of gender order, the patriarchal system, and sexual identity; of the very meaning of cultural barriers. Accordingly, she is both the haunting image of a familiar figure (a veiled nun) and an alien being (a dead, blood stained, large and masculinized demon); that is, an uncanny body that incarnates repressed sexual desire, a suppression that corrupts the domestic space in *The Monk* (the castle of Lindenberg, and the convent), now unhomely. In this sense, the suppurating blood as an abject substance generates a traumatic rejection on those who witness the Bleeding Nun – the “self-ghost” of a society exceedingly rational and obsessed with manners – as it materializes their suppressed desires and fears – namely, female sexuality, the corruption of the virgin body, or gender confusion –, heightening the feeling of horror in the narrative.

Furthermore, such abject experience is further intensified by the significance of her body’s instability. As a both dangerously alluring and repulsive entity able to change form and size, she is subject to be represented as a demonized Other. Her female body is hence constructed as inconceivable, as unstable, open, and malleable in comparison to the “stable male body” (Laquer, 22). At the time, the male body represented the fixed norm against the abnormal female body, which – containing a mystifyingly invisible reproductive apparatus – was a symbol of disorder. Accordingly, the Bleeding Nun severely shatters sexual difference, generating the aforementioned horror response. Her ever-changing physique, then, disrupts the sense of security entailed in cultural borders, and – rather than subscribing to women’s cultural and social negligence – gives different purposes to the female body, manifesting a clear desire of transformation. Consequently, by being depicted as an abject body (as eternally bleeding), the figure of the Bleeding Nun seems to suggest the need to cease those unchanging patriarchal ideals of restrained femininity, and replace them with a renewed self-assertive, and bold womanhood.

#### 4.5. *The Monk: An English, Protestant, Enlightened Novel?*

The Bleeding Nun has usually been examined as not only a feminine threat to patriarchal conceptions but – following Matthew Lewis’s apparent anti-Catholic agenda – to Protestantism itself: her perennial ghostly presence would be a reminder – for the English Anglican readership of the time – that Catholicism remains hidden, lurking in the shadows, plotting revenge. Her bleeding wound, then, would be a reference to those violent conflicts caused by Catholicism (in the story, by the Spanish Inquisition), namely the bloodstained English Reformation, or even to the European wars of religion, fought after the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, disrupting the religious and political order in Christendom.

The preface to *The Castle of Lindenberg; or the history of Raymond & Agnes, a Romance* (1799), one of the many chapbook adaptations of *The Monk*, already states this presumed anti-Catholicism quite clearly:

The subject of the following pages is founded on those remoter days of our ancestors when, blinded by **superstitions**, they sacrificed their dearest interest to the will of **monastic fanatics** who, under the pretence of religion, committed **the most cruel actions**; and with a zeal, deaf to all those tender feelings which distinguished a true Christian, **let fall their revenge on all those who were so unfortunate as to deviate from the path they had drawn out for them to pursue** (3).

However, as already mentioned in the first section of the present dissertation, Lewis seems to have some reservations regarding the purity of Protestantism as a potential replacement (or rather transcendence) of the traditional moral values Catholic education imposed. At the end of the novel, the infuriated crowd that burns down the abbey – the personification of Protestantism dismantling any trace of barbarian Catholicism – is depicted as equally tyrant and inhumanly cruel as the authorities of the St Clare convent. In this sense, following the preface above, the Catholic “superstitions” and “most cruel actions” seem to ironically fit the nature of Protestant devotees, “monastic fanatics” that also “revenge on those who (...) deviate from the path they have drawn.” Consequently, the Bleeding Nun, rather than being merely a victim of Catholicism, epitomizes a rather anti-clerical discourse as a reminder of the fatal consequences of existing in a world where religious education is unable to accommodate any transgression, any will of transformation. Her open wound is inevitably transfigured into a visceral indication of a system that has denied (and continues denying) her agency as an individual.

Following this presumption, it would seem fair to believe that Lewis’s novel – if not an Anti-Catholic reaction – is indeed a vindication of a rather more enlightened, secularized viewpoint. Far from it, the story reverses any common sense by reintroducing and acknowledging the unexplainable phenomena – and thus re-sacralizing its universe – as threatening forces, as evil dreads (rather than divine). The supernatural – which must be understood as those demonic impulses that inhabit the individual’s inner self – is restored through the figure of the Bleeding Nun, and neither the narrative nor the narrator, as well as most characters, seem to question her presence. It is noteworthy that, in many English Gothic novels from the late eighteenth-century, those supernatural events – associated with Catholicism – generally transpired as having rational explanations, and thus the “explained” supernatural (the “genuine” supernatural) was merely employed to produce the characteristic Gothic



ambience of suspense. Matthew Lewis's novel, escaping any Protestant rational expectations, gave the supernatural a functional purpose.

In other words, in *The Monk*, the "real" supernatural pervades every interaction, and a clear instance of such phenomenon is (again) the Bleeding Nun. Up until the introduction of the supernatural in the story – that is, the introduction of the Bleeding Nun – the plot relies on natural elements to invoke the horror expected of a Gothic novel. Accordingly, Raymond and Agnes assume a posture of contempt towards the world of the hereafter, but the occult bodies that are ridiculed and denied are exactly the ones that declare their actuality in the story: Agnes is supplanted by the real Bleeding Nun, who receives Raymond's marriage pledge in the nuptial coach. There is hence a point of intersection where the natural world gives way to the imperative appeals of the supernatural, manipulating the Gothic emotion, an experience of repulsion and awe that evidence nature as readied to receive and produce things beyond its phenomenological limits.

Mirroring the diabolical journeys depicted in traditional Demon Lover tales, the entry of the Bleeding Nun into Raymond's coach initiates a wild ride through a landscape where "winds howled around us (them), the lightning flashed, and the thunder roared tremendously" (Lewis, 167): the natural realm has conceived something else. After this event, Raymond's adventures – the nightly visitations of the Bleeding Nun, the revelation of her bloody history, the exorcisms of the Wandering Jew, and the mystic rites to lay the spirit's bones to rest – follow with flawless verisimilitude. Not only Raymond's adventures but the main plot – with Ambrosio, Matilda, and Antonia – is also disrupted, and, after the Bleeding Nun episode, their universe has expanded, and the awareness of both the characters and readers must broaden its abstractions in order to embrace new depths of experience.

Therefore, the Bleeding Nun epitomizes the decomposition of God sense and violent reason, Lewis's reaction against clericalism and violent Enlightened secularism, urging for a redefinition of those morals and divine entities that inhabit a disoriented world that is transitioning towards a modernized era. That is, in a post-sacred and violently rationalized world, nature is hence readied to receive the awful supernatural as the only assurance of a (new) morality by which retaliative justice originates in the fear of transgression, of the strange, which persists in and transforms its natural environment, embracing different, othered ways of existence. In this sense, the Bleeding Nun – who can only exist as the supernatural – clearly shows the irreparable flaws of both traditional religious morals (which transform her into a monstrous whore, or tragic lover), and rational values (which transform her into an unsexed demon), neither of them being able to accommodate her transgressions,

or rather her will of transformation, of ending with the constraints of a patriarchal society that deprives individuals of freely expressing their own gender and sexual identities.

#### 4.6. The Bleeding Nun as a Disconcerting Mirror

The story of “The Bleeding Nun of the Castle of Lindenberg” – an instant success among *The Monk*’s early readership – recounts the origin of a legendary figure condemned to haunt a world that has been unable to embrace her subversions (her sexual desires and physical violence). The ill-fated Beatrice de las Cisternas swaps the role of the nun for that of the mistress, the murderess, the deceased, and – finally – the undead, almost as if doomed to undergo such a macabre progression, to become a fated shadow whose undead presence unavoidably betrays the inconsistencies of a post-scarred, violently rational, living realm. Her brutal and lascivious past – which prefigures the experiences of the main female characters (Agnes, Matilda, and Antonia) in the story, her Gothic doubles – catalyze her mutation into a revolting being, into a veiled, wounded, bleeding ghost who still carries the bloody dagger she used to kill her former lover, and was used by her latter lover to kill her. However, such an outer appearance is not merely horrific due to its graphic vividity, but rather due to the distressing subversions conveyed within it. The opposition between her fair veil and the blood that emanates from her open wound foregrounds an excess of eroticism, and sentimentality; the impossibility of achieving any ideal of chastity, not even under the sacred habits of the novice, forever stained. Blood – a symbol of menorrhagia, of an organic “hysteria” that already predisposes her to commit such heinous acts – triggers a traumatic reaction from those who gaze at her, and thus reveals her as the ultimate, uncanniest abject body, a walking cadaver that – neither conceived by divine nature nor by violent reason – vanishes the cultural barriers between the self (the human, the male) and the other (the incomprehensible female, the animalistic object), and brings into the individual’s consciousness the unconscious (in this case, female unrestrained sexuality). By doing so, she corrupts the domestic sphere of both the main characters and readers, turning their collective imagination into an estranged canvas colored by a sense of continuous, corporeal instability. Such physical volatility – which is further achieved through her grotesquely size fluidity –, rather than contributing to the social and cultural marginalization characteristic of those (particularly Male) Gothic fictional representations of women, exposes the precariousness of the (religious and rational) morals of the time, and reveals an ardent will of transformation – the transformation of the constructed female body, gender specificity, and hence of those patriarchal constraints –, one which cannot even be suppressed in the afterlife, but which can only exist in terms of the supernatural; a liminal state of existence that allows the author demystify any sacred or enlightened ideology as both have proven to be inadequate to welcome those new ways of experience. The Bleeding Nun – the ultimate supernatural entity in *The Monk* –

epitomizes the religious and political confusion of a transitioning world through her abrupt introduction into and transformation of the phenomenological limits of nature, which must accept her as the guarantee of a (new) morality; one that originates from transgression, and is able to allocate the strange, the othered. Therefore, the Bleeding Nun intersects and fractures those remnants of the traditional clerical education, violent reason, and chauvinistic medical perceptions on the female body in order to give way to new realities, and thus becomes a shattered, double mirror that reflects (both) a newborn moral understanding as well as the old anxieties, fears, and desires of those who look at her; an image of (future) possibility; a possibility that is indeed hinted (and barely materialized) by the fact that – her remains finally buried properly by Raymond – she is freed from her cursed in the end, achieving her ultimate goal – freedom – through her reiterated monstrousness.

## 5. *Conclusion*

The “offspring of no common genius” (Coleridge, 370), *The Monk* became an instant success through its sensational, (porno)graphic portrayal of sexuality, rape, murder, and death, which simultaneously generated an extreme conservative outcry. Controversial since birth, Lewis’s Gothic romance possesses a singular apprehension of its historical framework as it dramatizes the puzzled reactions of a transitioning world that had to reconcile (or rather transcend) those traditional, Christian morals with a growing absence of faith under Enlightened pretenses. In this sense, an apparent Protestant, Enlightened novella in Catholic package, *The Monk* remodeled the Gothic mode with its gruesome, horror tones, and – aware of its conventionalisms – conceived the most abject, grotesque, and uncanny motif, the Bleeding Nun. The inset tale of the Bleeding Nun has certainly been the most celebrated moment in the novel as it not only blends such conventions but simultaneously ridicules any strict categorization or resolution, satirizing the “explained supernatural” with an implicit purpose, that of exposing the fragility of the religious and rational belief-systems at the time.

This dissertation has aimed at elucidating such a macabre figure as the primary force in the story, one whose brutal past, abject appearance, and murderous motivations disguise a series of complexities that not only underlie everything else in the novel but reveal her as the ultimate incarnation of the collapse of those traditional moral values – which cannot be transcended by either a “sterilized” religion (English Protestantism) or violent, rigid rationality –, of the intersection between revolution and reaction, transgression and conformism, human and bestial, virtue and violence, and thus manifesting the fatal effects of existing in an interstitial space where neither religion nor reason are able to welcome those othered realities, identities, and interrelations. In order to unfold her as a tell-tale of such ideological fragilities, a description of Lewis’s religious and political influences has been

developed through an examination of Anti-Catholicism as well as the French Revolution as crucial discourses for the depiction of the Bleeding Nun.

In the first section (“Virgins, Whores, and Lovers”), the contextualization of an emerging Protestant England has provided the essential historical setting for the aforementioned Anti-Catholic discourse, one that determined the Gothic representations of the figure of the nun as either a prostitute, wasted virgin, or tragic lover, and – following this reasoning – the convent as either a brothel, a prison, or asylum. Nonetheless, the all-pervasive presence of female characters in Lewis’s work – in conjunction with a display of female domestic authority – has proven the existence of certain matriarchal areas that obliterate any phallogocentric assumption, transforming the convent into a liberating space for those dissenting women. Furthermore, a concise revision of one of the decisive scenes in the novel – the burning of the St Clare convent – has offered a new interpretation on the supposed Anti-Catholic discourse; that is, the representation of the anti-Catholic mob as inhumanely cruel as the religious tyrants – and seemingly manifesting a certain satisfaction from such carnage – has shown a rather anti-clerical take, one that openly reveals anxiety towards revolutionary violence, already introducing the French Revolution as another decisive influence.

In the second section (“Revolutionary Demons”), then, making use of some critical voices – namely, the Marquis de Sade, and Mary Wollstonecraft – France political upheaval, as well as those advances in human biology have been located as the catalysts of those cultural barriers regarding the “natural” differentiation between genders – between the male (the rational, the public) and the female (the incomprehensible, the domestic) –, and thus the catalysts of a new third gender: the violent woman as the “unfemale.” The character of Matilda has been introduced as the explicit embodiment of such cultural constructions, as a sexual assertive and violent woman – and, by extension, a grotesque monster – whose transgending abilities signify a liberating process, a fluidity that allow her transgress gender roles, and already expose the insubstantial rigidities of gender specificities, which will be further unmasked by the figure of the Bleeding Nun.

In the last section (“Veiled and Unhealed”), the Bleeding Nun is dissected as a doubled shadow whose abject and uncanny body – derived from the opposition generated by her veil and the blood that oozes from her open wound – generates a traumatic reaction due its capacity to vanish any sexual distinction, the barriers between the conscious – female forbidden sexuality – and the unconscious – female erotic and violent potential –, but most strikingly due to her corporeal instability, which exhibits a will of transformation of both the culturally constructed female body and those gendered classifications. Such a will of transformation, which cannot even be suppressed in the hereafter, can only remain, however, in the form of the supernatural as neither sacred nor enlightened ideologies are

capable to embrace it. The Bleeding Nun (the sexual Other) introduces, then, an intangible reality, and inevitably disrupts the phenomenological depths of nature, which must accept her as a (new) morality that originates from transgression, and thus is able to allocate those estranged, othered ways of existence. Accordingly, the Bleeding Nun (the ultimate supernatural figure) epitomizes the fatal consequences clerical and enlightened discourses of the time had on those marginalized realities (namely, female sexual assertiveness), and thus reveals the intellectual and political fog that pervaded an early modernized world through the reflection of uncertain possibilities.

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Barcelona, a \_\_\_\_\_ 17 de juny de 2022

Signatura: